



Transcript for “Nineteenth Century Women’s Literary Culture in America”

An Audio Program from *This Goodly Land: Alabama’s Literary Landscape*

Interviewer Maiben Beard and Dr. James Emmett Ryan of Auburn University discuss women’s contributions to literary culture in Nineteenth Century America. This transcript has been edited for readability.

Ms. Beard: Welcome to *This Goodly Land*’s audio program about Nineteenth Century women’s literary culture in America. I’m Maiben Beard. We are talking today with Dr. James Emmett Ryan of the Auburn University Department of English.

It’s good to have you with us today, Dr. Ryan.

Dr. Ryan: It’s great to be here. Thank you.

Ms. Beard: Let’s start by talking about the reading experience in the Nineteenth Century. What was it like to be a reader during this period?

Dr. Ryan: It was a very exciting time to be a reader in the United States during the Nineteenth Century for a number of different reasons. It’s probably fair to say that, after the Revolutionary War of the late Eighteenth Century in the United States, reading had actually become a complete necessity of life. It was essential for all Americans to be able to read and, in fact, apart from the slave population and the Native American population in the United States, we estimate that about ninety percent of Americans were literate (could read and write), and it was becoming vital to their daily lives as American citizens.

In addition, during the Nineteenth Century, American readers were faced with a tidal wave of different kinds of reading materials. These ranged from newspapers, which increased in number and in circulation throughout the Nineteenth Century, magazines of all kinds, and, of course, books of all kinds as well. We have to keep in mind that, during the early Nineteenth Century, there was no TV (this is obvious to most of your listeners), there was no Internet. Reading was a necessity of life. Reading and writing were critical for American citizens, and it shaped the way the country developed during the Nineteenth Century.

Ms. Beard: What was going on in the publishing industry at this time?

Dr. Ryan: It was an exciting time in the publishing industry, particularly toward the middle of the Nineteenth Century. What happened during the Nineteenth Century is that transportation allowed publishing to become a very big business. During the period from about 1830 to about 1860 (just before the Civil War began), the commercialization of publishing meant that suddenly ordinary American people who were good at writing could make a very nice living as writers. As a consequence, lots of different kinds of people began to enter the publishing sphere during those years.

Ms. Beard: Who was writing the books that Nineteenth Century Americans were reading?

Dr. Ryan: Interestingly enough, Americans read books not just by Americans but also by Europeans primarily. This changed during the course of the Nineteenth Century, but during the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, the typical book that a typical American person would read was written by someone in England or by a person in another European country. It took a while in the Nineteenth Century for American publishers to gain enough ground and to gain enough commercial traction that they could publish their own books.

It also took quite a while before Americans began thinking of developing a literary tradition of their own as distinct from the European tradition and particularly the English tradition. So, during the antebellum period particularly (that is, before the Civil War), American writers were influenced very strongly by European writers. But eventually, and particularly during the Eighteen Fifties, they began to write books that we could actually call distinctively American, that is, distinctively American in terms of political ideas, distinctively American in terms of the kinds of social issues that these writers decided to engage with, and distinctively American in terms of the kinds of religious ideas that came into the discourse around that time.

Ms. Beard: What was it like to be a writer then?

Dr. Ryan: During the Nineteenth Century, the business of writing changed a lot. I alluded to this earlier by talking about the commercialization of writing and publishing and by talking about the fact that ordinary people who were good storytellers and good writers could actually make a very tidy living by the middle of the Nineteenth Century. So what was going on was that many more people were participating in the business of writing and the business of publishing. Major cities like New York City and Boston, Baltimore, and, later in the Nineteenth Century, Chicago, but also smaller cities like Richmond, had become publishing centers. So the business of publishing had become very much an urban phenomenon, and those who were close to big cities had the best kinds of opportunities to become writers during the Nineteenth Century, particularly, that is, professional writers.

Ms. Beard: How did women become involved in professional authorship?

Dr. Ryan: Professional authorship was something that women came to mainly toward the middle of the Nineteenth Century. What we have to keep in mind about women's writing in the Nineteenth Century is that, particularly for women during the early decades of the Nineteenth Century, professional writing was not considered a particularly appropriate kind of pursuit. Now this changed somewhat as the century went on, but initially there was a lot of criticism of women

who decided to become writers, and, as a consequence, there were not very many women in the business of writing (although again, this changed greatly during the middle decades of the Nineteenth Century).

But, in fact, we know now, by studying the history of the period, that the most popular writers in America were women during this period. They were the ones who had the best sellers. They were the ones who wrote the books that young people bought and read and talked about. Which is not to say that there weren't great male writers, in fact there were many, but when it comes to the popular culture and when it comes to popular reading practices, it was a world of women. It was a world of women storytellers, and it was a world of women making a lot of money as writers, particularly after the phenomenon of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was published in the middle of the Nineteenth Century in 1851, and it became *the* bestselling novel of the Nineteenth Century by any American woman. In fact, it was even more popular in England where it had millions of readers as well. So, women writers by the middle of the Nineteenth Century were at center stage. They were the ones who were producing the most characteristically American writing.

Ms. Beard: What do we mean when we refer to the "separate spheres"? How did that concept influence women's writing during the Nineteenth Century?

Dr. Ryan: The idea of "separate spheres" is a concept that refers to gender differences in social and professional activities. This was a phenomenon that we see entering the public discourse of the Nineteenth Century in ways that showed a preferred path for women—to lead their lives as domestic creatures assigned the duties of raising children, creating a comfortable home life for their families and for their husbands—that assigned roles where they would not be involved in politics or in business or in trade or in anything that would take them outside the confines of the domestic sphere.

By contrast, the separate sphere for men was understood during the Nineteenth Century as the public sphere (as opposed to the private sphere for women). The public sphere would involve activities like, again, politics, business, warfare (any activities in the military), adventuring out West (exploring the mountain West, the trans-Mississippi West, the gold mining of the mid-century). These were all male activities and understood to be so. So there was a very strong current in the discourse of the Nineteenth Century that said, in essence, women have activities in life, men have activities, and they really shouldn't be confused.

What this meant for publishing and for women writers was that writing novels, especially, became a way for women to practice some of those activities that were understood to be within the women's sphere conventionally, but also to become public figures. So that, if we take the example of a woman who was writing bestselling novels during the middle of the Nineteenth Century, she was enabled to tell stories that might focus on home life, might focus on children, might focus on relationships leading to courtship and leading to marriage, but, at the same time, that woman writer was becoming a recognized figure for her writing.

The example of Harriet Beecher Stowe again is a useful one. Harriet Beecher Stowe was someone who began by writing a geography textbook as a young woman, eventually wrote

stories, and eventually wrote very widely selling novels and became actually a kind of celebrity in the Nineteenth Century. So this idea of separate spheres is an important concept for the Nineteenth Century because it basically frames the idea of how men and women were thought to best lead their lives. But, at the same time, professional writing culture allowed women to move outside of those spheres through their writing activities and become more progressive in the way that they understood women's lives, women's activities, and women's contribution to the culture.

Ms. Beard: Is there such a thing as a "typical" Nineteenth Century woman writer?

Dr. Ryan: It's difficult to draw too many generalizations about women writers during the Nineteenth Century, but we can draw some conclusions about those who became successful in the business of writing. It's clear that many different kinds of women wrote privately, wrote letters, wrote various kinds of messages to their friends and families, and kept diaries, but, when it comes to the business of publishing, the kinds of women writers who acquired national reputations or international reputations, we can definitely draw some conclusions.

We can conclude that there were very few African American women writers, for instance, particularly until the later years of the Nineteenth Century. We can conclude that there were very few, if any, Native American women writers until very late in the Nineteenth Century. Instead, what we see in looking at the prominent women writers in the United States during the Nineteenth Century is that they were mostly white, they were mostly from the Northeastern United States (although there are some important Southern women writers that we can talk about). We can conclude that they were mainly Protestant women, although there were some exceptions to that too, and, even within the Protestant denominations, many women writers of note were Unitarian or Congregational. So we have a relatively narrow cohort of women writers in the Nineteenth Century who had become the most notable and highly regarded writers of the century.

But, at the same time, we should point out that writing in the Nineteenth Century was not an entirely democratic activity. It basically drew women who were well educated, particularly women who were connected in various ways with Protestant religious denominations. The typical woman writer of the Nineteenth Century would have a minister as a husband, for instance, and there were lots of examples of women like that. As a consequence, the kinds of writing that the popular women writers of the period produced frequently emphasized those aspects of their background. That is, there was a kind of Protestant ethos behind a lot of the stories, a lot of the novels that women writers produced. There was a Northeastern United States emphasis so that the settings for those books were distinctively New England or certainly the Mid-Atlantic states. There again were exceptions to this by the Southern writers, but Nineteenth Century women's literary culture was very much a Northeastern United States phenomenon and very much a white Protestant phenomenon.

Ms. Beard: How were the political issues of the Nineteenth Century reflected in women's writing?

Dr. Ryan: Political issues came in lots of different varieties during the Nineteenth Century. It

would be hard to talk about all of them, but two issues in particular, I think, framed a lot of the writing that women produced. The first issue, of course, is writing that talked about what it meant to be not just a woman, not just a family person, but an American woman, an American family person. So the idea of Republican motherhood, the idea of American womanhood, was a very strong current in women's writing of the Nineteenth Century.

Apart from that current, though, which is mainly something that we see during the earlier decades of the Nineteenth Century, *the* political issue of the Nineteenth Century was the economy of slavery in the United States. Increasingly, as the years come closer to the Civil War era of the Eighteen Sixties, American women writers were engaging with the issue of slavery in very significant ways and from a variety of perspectives. We have Southern writers who were giving perspectives about slavery and the role of African Americans in the slave economy that were, of course, very different from the politics of some of the Northern women writers who were criticizing slavery, who were siding with the Abolitionists, who were proposing that slavery be done away with.

So those were the two big issues. Alongside of those issues, and sometimes present at the same time that we see discussions of American womanhood or we see discussions of the role of slavery or a critique of slavery in American culture, were issues such as those related to evangelical Christianity. So that we might have a story written by a woman in which Christians were confronting the issue of slavery. Or we might see the situation where women were confronting issues relating to slavery but also to temperance, that is, the idea that alcohol should be prohibited.

So, to sum all that up, there's a great deal of moralism, didacticism, a great deal of self-conscious teaching of the American people through writing by American women.

Ms. Beard: Tell us more about the relationship between women's writing and cultural movements during the Nineteenth Century.

Dr. Ryan: The temperance movement was an interesting one. During the Nineteenth Century, particularly the early years of the Nineteenth Century, it's pretty clear from historians who have focused on the issue that alcohol consumption was a very significant issue. In the public sphere, during the Nineteenth Century (in which print was the crucial medium), there were all kinds of discussions about whether alcohol should be prohibited. There were all kinds of writings related to the kinds of problems that excessive alcohol consumption produced in Americans.

As a result, books of the period focused on this quite heavily and had a very strongly didactic and moralistic tone when it came to that issue. So this is a way of saying that American women were very strongly engaged in the improvement of American culture, and one of the signal issues in the improvement of American culture was what to do about excessive alcohol consumption. We can see these discourses of the Nineteenth Century leading to eventual prohibition of alcohol in the early Twentieth Century (in the Nineteen Twenties).

Other social issues of course were related to evangelical Christianity. I used the example of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who in many ways was *the* preeminent American woman writer of the

period. In Stowe's writing, we can see all kinds of political and social issues coming together. For instance, Stowe is best known for her novel about slavery, or her best-selling novel about slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which I alluded to previously.

But, in that novel, which sold millions of copies and had millions of readers and was a stunning kind of publishing event in the Nineteenth Century leading up to the Civil War and even after, Stowe criticized alcohol consumption among other things. The villains in that story were not only slaveholders, but they were also excessive consumers of alcohol. So we can see her blending the discourse of abolitionism with the discourse of temperance, that is, the discourse of opposing alcohol consumption, as a way of talking about a better path, a better moral path, for American citizens.

Ms. Beard: How have attitudes of reviewers and critics towards Nineteenth Century women writers changed over the last two centuries?

Dr. Ryan: That's a very, very interesting question and it's a question that relates to cultural authority, and it's a question that relates to the rise of universities and a culture of criticism that's professionalized in the Twentieth and the Twenty-First Centuries. I should say a word or two first about attitudes in the Nineteenth Century toward women writers. One of the attitudes that's important is one that I mentioned a short time ago, and that is the notion that it might be improper for women to become writers in the view of some male critics during the Nineteenth Century. There was considerable resentment toward women writers on the part of male publishers sometimes and on the part of male writers. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, is famous for having dismissed his competitors in the publishing field as a "damned mob of scribbling women," by which he meant that his own works never sold as well as the most popular women writers of the period. He certainly resented that, he was no feminist.

Later in the Nineteenth Century, women writers in the United States certainly came to predominate in publishing circles, but criticism of them and the academic attitude by literary historians toward them is something that changed a great deal over the later Nineteenth and the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries. During the early Twentieth Century, for instance, most women writers were lumped together in critical terms as "sentimental" writers, by which academic critics of the period (most of whom or nearly all of whom were men), favored the writings of male writers of the Nineteenth Century and basically said that the women writers of the period were excessively emotional, that they dwelt on issues of no particular consequence for the modern period, that they simply weren't literary craftsmen of the same order as the more significant male writers of the period.

This kind of attitude toward Nineteenth Century women writers persisted for most of the Twentieth Century, ironically enough, until the Nineteen Sixties and Nineteen Seventies, a period that coincided with the entry of significant numbers of women into university English departments and history departments. Since that time, that is, basically in the last forty or fifty years, there has been an enormous revision in historical and critical attitudes toward women writers of the Nineteenth Century. We now understand women writers of the period in a much more sophisticated way than we did one hundred years ago.

The academic study of American literature now includes the study of women writers of that period. Writers like Louisa May Alcott, Mary Virginia Terhune, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, and even Emily Dickinson—the study of women writers such as those is now center stage in American literary history. These writers are center stage in how we think about the popular literary activities of the Nineteenth Century. So the answer to your question about how attitudes towards these writers have changed is that attitudes have changed tremendously and definitely for the better. Today we have a much, much better understanding of the importance of women writers to the popular culture of the period than we have ever had before.

Ms. Beard: Thank you for talking with us, Dr. Ryan.

Dr. Ryan: It was my pleasure. Thank you.

Ms. Beard: We've been talking about Nineteenth Century women's literary culture in America with Dr. James Emmett Ryan of the Auburn University Department of English.

This audio program is produced for *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*, a Web site connecting Alabama and its writers. You can find additional resources on this topic when you visit us at www.alabamaliterarymap.org.

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Thank you for listening.